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South Asian Irony

The many disastrous aspects of President Nixon's policies in the India-Pakistan conflict have masked the main irony disclosed by the Anderson papers. It is that the Nixon-Kissinger approach, favoring Pakistan over India, helped bring about precisely what it was their chief objective to forestall: a Soviet victory and a major increase in Soviet influence in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean.

Until columnist Jack Anderson published the secret minutes of White House meetings, observers could only guess at the rationale behind Mr. Nixon's decision to abandon a quarter-century of American impartiality in the subcontinent's feud. But the minutes show Mr. Kissinger's overriding concern from the beginning of hostilities that Soviet military aid and Soviet vetoes in the United Nations would enable India to destroy its chief adversary—and the balance of power on the subcontinent—by attacking and dismembering West Pakistan once East Pakistan had been conquered. Strictly in terms of Great Power rivalry, Pakistan's supporters—the United States and China—would be the losers, while the Soviet Union as India's backer would emerge predominant in the area.

Other top Administration officials, however, expressed doubts about the Kissinger thesis that India was planning with Soviet support to attack West Pakistan. Ambassador Keating in New Delhi urged the White House to favor India, which not only was the inevitable victor but had the better moral case. This course would have avoided leaving India with Moscow as its only backer, but Mr. Keating's advice was ignored, if indeed it ever reached the cloistered President.

Mr. Nixon's isolation from the first-hand advice and argument of the Government's own experts is one of the striking revelations of the Anderson transcripts. Though incomplete and therefore perhaps not revealing the entire story, they do show Mr. Kissinger as an all-powerful intermediary handing down Presidential orders and discouraging doubting questions even about minor tactics. A Chief Executive who fails to expose himself to the fullest information, free debate and the challenges of others to his prejudices can hardly be protected from blunders by even the most brilliant White House staffs.

Not only is it improbable that the Kissinger-Nixon analysis was correct. The special irony was that their acquiescence over eight months in President Yahya Khan's bloody repression of East Pakistan helped thrust India into Russia's arms and create the danger of the very war Mr. Nixon was trying to avoid. CIA Director Helms told one White House meeting that Moscow's "major policy switch" to support Indian military action did not occur until "just prior to Chinese emergence into the U.N. scene" in the Fall.

As early as mid-April, Ambassador Keating in New Delhi argued that open American pressure on President Yahya Khan for a political settlement—rather than the cautious, secret persuasion that failed—would better fit the realities of Pakistan's deterioration, India's predominance and Bangladesh's emergence. "We should be guided by the new power realities in South Asia which, fortunately, in the present case, largely parallel the moral realities as well," he reportedly cabled Washington.

It was by ignoring the moral realities, misjudging the power realities, and failing to heed—or to be informed of—the political realities that Mr. Nixon put the United States on the slippery slope to its present predicament in South Asia.